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INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
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RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC IMMEDIATE

C O N F I D E N T I A L MOSCOW 002274

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/06/2018
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [GG](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: RUSSIA DENIES VOLUNTEER FLOW TO SOUTH OSSETIA;
UNHCR CONFIRMS REFUGEE/IDPS

REF: MOSCOW 2268

Classified By: Acting Deputy Chief of Mission Alice G. Wells.
Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary. The MFA denied August 6 that "volunteers" were traveling from the North Caucasus to South Ossetia to join the fighting in case of conflict with Georgia, noting that the situation remained quiet. They said they could not answer whether the GOR or local authorities in North Ossetia were taking steps to discourage or prevent people from crossing the border to join the separatists, noting simply that Russia's envoy to South Ossetia Ambassador Popov would discuss the issue on Thursday with Georgian Reintegration Minister Yakobashvili and South Ossetian JCC representative Chochiyev. Media reported that several Cossack organizations had said they would send volunteers or provide practical assistance to South Ossetia in the event of a conflict. UNHCR confirmed to us that 548 children and 271 adults had been evacuated to North Ossetia-Alania, and they expected 300 more before the end of the day. While reasonable voices in the MFA decry the flirtation with volunteers, less responsible actors likely see them as useful tools in keeping temperatures high and Georgia off-balance. End summary.

12. (C) MFA 4th CIS Acting Director Dmitriy Tarabrin early August 6 downplayed press reports of South Ossetian leader Kokoity's claim that 300 "volunteers" from the North Caucasus had traveled to South Ossetia to join the fighting in case of war with Georgia and that up to 2000 would flow in. Saying the MFA continued to believe Kokoity's statements about "volunteers" were "declaratory only" (reftel) and the situation in the region remained calm, Tarabrin said the GOR did not think there would be a significant egress of persons from North Ossetia or other Caucasus republics to South Ossetia. However, he said he could not answer whether the GOR was taking any measures to discourage or prevent such a cross-border flow, noting that Popov would meet with the two sides on Thursday.

13. (U) Nezavisimaya Gazeta reported that Viktor Vodolatskiy, State Duma Deputy and Supreme Chieftain of the Union of Cossack Troops of Russian and Foreign States, had said the Cossacks were "prepared to defend the people of South Ossetia from Georgian aggression," and were ready to send 300 "volunteers" to enforce Russian and South Ossetian peacekeeping battalions. A Don Cossack NGO, the Great Don Army, had also announced its readiness to provide "practical assistance" if peace negotiations failed. According to the media, Great Don Army Chieftain Kozitsyn said lists of volunteers had been formed and the Cossacks would be able to send 10-15,000 volunteers, all of whom had combat experience. The press noted that both leaders had been avoiding using

the term "mercenaries," since under the Russian criminal code, "mercenary activity" was a crime punished by imprisonment for three to seven years. But, experts said, the crime was difficult to prove and applied only to internationally recognized military conflicts, when profit considerations were part of the person's motivation, and when the mercenaries were not citizens of countries involved in the conflict.

14. (C) UNHCR told us that according to their local government counterparts as of the morning of August 6, 548 children and 271 adults had been recorded as having been evacuated from South Ossetia to North Ossetia-Alania, and 300 more were expected before the end of the day. There were no reports of men or unaccompanied minors among the evacuees. UNHCR said the arrivals were indeed evacuees and not children going as usual to summer camp, but noted that it could not be excluded that some such cases existed as children going to camp would have occurred at the same time as the evacuation. They reported they were not involved and had not yet been requested to get involved. However, UNHCR, UNICEF and some NGOs had visited some of the sites containing evacuees, but since there were no declared or assessed urgent needs, and local authorities seemed to be responding appropriately and had not requested assistance, the agencies had not taken any concrete actions. UNHCR, however, was prepared to assist if required, even though most of the evacuees were likely not refugees per se, since they held Russian passports.

Comment

15. (C) As Popov told us, playing with "volunteers" is dangerous and provocative. While Cossack and other "non-governmental" organizations may be posturing, Ekho Moskviiy Editor Venediktov is among those who have underscored their utility to the Russian leadership, as elements less reasonable than Popov seek to keep temperatures high in the increasingly unfrozen conflict areas of Georgia.
RUBIN